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Winter Storms and Cold & Snow Weather Safety

Winter Storms:

Snowfall is a common occurrence in Michigan; however, Midland County generally does not experience the vast amount of snow that is received by counties in western and northern Michigan. Even so, Midland residents have seen their share of snowstorms. By definition, a snowstorm is a period of rapidly accumulating snow often accompanied by high winds, cold temperatures and low visibility. If the described conditions are particularly intense, the storm is classified as a blizzard.

A blizzard occurred in Michigan on January 26-27, 1978. Thirty-four inches of snow fell, and winds of 50-70 mph piled the snow into drifts. As a result of the storm, more than 50,000 miles of roadway were blocked, 104,000 vehicles were abandoned, 15,000 people found themselves in mass care shelters and 390,000 homes were without electric power. Two days after the storm, 90 percent of the state's roads were still impassible. The entire state went under a Presidential Emergency Declaration.

The word "snow" in a National Weather Service forecast, without a qualifying word such as "occasional", means that snow will fall steadily and will probably continue uninterrupted for several hours. "Snow flurries" are defined as snow falling for short durations at intermittent periods. The following watches and warnings are issued by the National Weather Service for hazardous winter storms.

- **WINTER STORM WATCH** means that winter storm conditions may affect the area.
- **WINTER STORM WARNING** means that severe winter weather conditions are occurring or are imminent.
- **ICE STORM WARNING** means that significant - and possibly damaging - ice accumulations are expected.
- **HEAVY SNOW WARNING** means that snowfall of at least 4 inches in 12 hours or 6 inches in 24 hours is expected.
- **BLIZZARD WARNING** indicates that falling and blowing snow and winds of at least 35 mph are expected for several hours.
- **SEVERE BLIZZARD WARNING** signifies that considerable falling and blowing snow, winds of at least 45 mph and temperatures of 10 degrees F or lower are expected for several hours.

Winter Storm Safety Rules

- Keep ahead of winter storms by listening to the latest weather warnings and bulletins on radio and television.
- Make sure battery-powered radios or televisions have fresh batteries and are working properly. They could be your only means of contact with the outside world during the storm.
- If you live in a rural area, make sure you have an adequate supply of heating fuel. Also, make sure you have plenty of food and essential supplies on hand.
- Have food supplies that are non-perishable and require little or no preparation.
- Stay indoors during a blizzard. Don't go out unless it is absolutely necessary.

- In extremely cold weather, wear loose-fitting, lightweight, warm clothing in several layers. Body heat is trapped between each layer to keep you warm. If necessary, layers of clothing can be removed to prevent perspiration and chills. Outer garments should be tightly woven, water repellent and hooded. Mittens that are snug at the wrist are better hand protection than gloves.
- Get your car winterized in the fall. Keep the tank full of gasoline. Keep a car emergency kit with blankets, flashlight, booster cables, snack food, first aid, extra clothes and a snow shovel.
- If you get stuck in your car, stay with the vehicle. Run your engine periodically to stay warm until help arrives.
- Don't over-exert yourself. It is easy to do if you are not used to vigorous exercise.

Tips for Dealing With Cold & Snow:

Winter can be an invigorating and enjoyable season. It also can be hazardous and unpredictable. Since winter weather conditions change frequently and rapidly, it is a smart idea to be prepared.

Wind Chill

Winter temperatures can be deceiving. Thermometers measure only the cold. Don't forget that the effects upon your body are compounded by the wind. The combined effect of winter cold and wind speed is called wind chill. The dangerous effects of wind chill rise as the temperature drops and the wind speed increases. Heat is carried away faster from the skin, driving down body temperature. This can lead to frostbite or hypothermia.

Warning signs of hypothermia, or low body temperature, include:

- Uncontrollable shivering
- Memory loss
- Disorientation
- Incoherence
- Slurred speech
- Drowsiness
- Apparent exhaustion

To determine if a person has hypothermia, take his or her temperature. If the body temperature is below 95 degrees F, immediately seek medical assistance.

Winter Dress

To avoid a chill, try to stay warm and dry. Layering clothing helps prepare you for different conditions and activities. Use three essential layers - underwear, insulation and outer shell - in different combinations to maintain comfort through changes in weather and exertion levels.

- **Underwear:** Provides basic insulation and moves moisture from skin, preventing chill when activity stops. Choose long underwear or thin, snug-fitting pants with a long-sleeved T-shirt or turtleneck.
- **Insulation:** Use one or more layers, depending on conditions. Sweaters, sweatshirts and other similar garments are good insulators. Some newer insulating pieces also are suitable as an outer shell in milder weather.
- **Outer Shell:** Choose garments that are windproof and preferably waterproof. Good fit is crucial. If the shell is too big, heat loss can occur. If it is too small, there may not be enough room for insulating layers.

Walks And Driveways

Treading a slick sidewalk or moving your car from a slippery driveway can be dangerous. Accidental deaths most frequently occur in January when an estimated 1,000 people die from falls outside the house.

- **Act Early:** It's easier to remove snow immediately after a snowfall before it becomes packed or turns to ice.
- **Keep Sidewalks Safe:** Many ice melters can reduce the risk of slips and falls and are more effective than items such as kitty litter and sand.
- **Clear a Wide Path:** Clear more than a single shovel width to make walking safer and easier.
- **Shoveling:** This demands heavy physical exertion. The strain can cause a heart attack. Sweating from over-exertion can lead to a chill and hypothermia. If you must shovel, remember to take it slow, lift small amounts (especially when snow is wet and heavy), and use proper posture to prevent back strain.